Liberia and the Fate of Interim Government in the Regional Vortex of West Africa

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Introduction

What policy value might derive from analyzing the recent experience of Liberia with interim governments as conflict management and institution building agents? The Liberian case provides a window into a set of factors that exist in a number of countries—fragile regimes that "govern" resource-rich economies—that could potentially lead to state erosion and failure in many countries with these same features:

1. First, Liberia is the prototypical weak state eroded first by privilege, and subsequently by ambitious individuals whose use of armed gangs brought down the state.
2. Second, Liberia, along with Sierra Leone, provides an optic on contemporary warlord politics as a condition with its own specifiable properties and political economy.
3. Third, Liberia's disintegration, its civil war, the interim governments and its future governance arrangements are intimately tied to subregional politics (the Mano River Basin).
4. Finally, Liberia's experience with regional peacekeepers and regional economic arrangements provides both cautionary tales and positive precedents with respect to state-building, governance, stability and legitimacy.

Overall, explaining how and why the Liberian state failed, and the challenges and opportunities faced by the international community as it sought to reconstitute a viable Liberian regime, therefore hold lessons for many countries in similar situations.

Origins of the Liberian State and the Seeds of State Failure

The factors that led to the civil war that devastated Liberia in the 1990s were intimately tied to the creation of the country in 1847. Liberia is an artifact of the emigration of "free" American slaves to Africa under the agency of the American Colonization Society. Described as "an alternative to abolition," this movement began in the 1820s, culminating in a settler "republic" in 1847.[1] Over the next hundred years the coastal settlers evolved into a tightly knit community of privilege, which historically has sat uneasily on top of the majority indigenous population. The Americo-Liberians, as they came to be called, governed a unitary sovereign state through which they variously fought, exploited and, to an extent, co-opted the indigenous people in the countryside. Power and wealth were extremely concentrated: a few families controlled great quantities of land: the 20 largest Liberian logging concessions covered 8500 sq miles, while 3,000 independent private rubber estates (15% of territory) turned local inhabitants into laborers, dependent on those families. By the 1940s political and economic power reposed in roughly 300 families of Americo-Liberians who had few ties to the indigenous population other than those of economic exploitation.

In the mid-twentieth century, William Tubman served as the president of the sovereign Republic of Liberia. His great power derived from his role as godfather/broker to the elite families, his control over both the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF, an internal security force) and public revenues, and a singular political organization, the True Whig Party, which he used to manage national affairs from 1944 to his death in 1971. Government and businesses were dominated by a "circle of relatives, other Americo-Liberian families, and more recent local assimilated tribal entrants in this 'honorable' class."[2]

Such limited rule could not last forever, however. By the 1960s, no longer able to contain aspirations for greater participation, especially given the wholesale expansion of political independence of all his neighbors along the West African littoral, Tubman was forced to open up the system. In that regard new county jurisdictions were established binding the countryside to the coast in the same political-administrative framework. The extension of the franchise to indigenous people along with greatly expanded educational opportunities combined to create a slightly more inclusive society, at least at the margins.[3]

Yet in a dynamic similar to that found across Latin America and Southern Europe, these reforms only served to evoke more expansive ambitions of younger people in Tubman's own class. His successor in 1971, William R. Tolbert, was cross-pressured by the conservative elites who wanted to extend the privileges of their own progeny. They induced him to privatize more communal land to generate export income. While this served the intended purpose of extending opportunities for already powerful elites, it also ejected indigenous farmers from their land, further alienating the masses from the political and economic elite. The Tolbert government continued to turn a blind eye to the low wages paid to both rural and urban labor, leaving the majority with a mean, subsistence existence.

These conditions were well noted by local intellectuals and professionals, returning overseas graduates and local youth. They were well informed of how politics and government had changed among the neighboring states in the 1960s and 70s, were steeped in the rhetoric of liberation that had spawned liberation movements across Africa, and were motivated by the rhetoric of equality and human rights that accompanied the decolonization of Africa. Accordingly two organizations emerged in the 1970s that offered a modest challenge to the monopoly on authority enjoyed by the True Whig Party and the Tolbert government: the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) which advocated for social justice, rule of law and democratization generally; and the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL) which focused more specifically on multiparty electoral competition.[4]

While Tubman had been able to balance competing demands, and therefore to insulate his powerbase from challenges, Tolbert failed to develop such skills and failed to maintain a consistent response to the dual challenges of meeting the demands of his supporters while pacifying the masses. Therefore, economic and political agitation soon began to spiral out of control, with demands focusing on the introduction of a multiparty democratic political process, including electoral reform. These demands peaked in the late 1970s at a time of economic decline, in part due to the cost of petroleum product imports.[5]

Events came to a head in April 1979, when in response to a 50 per cent increase in the price of a bag of rice the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL) called for a protest march. The police overreacted, started shooting into the crowd and killed "somewhere between 40 and 140," wounding an "additional 400."[6] The Tolbert government became so rattled that it asked neighboring Guinea to intervene to restore order. With 700 Guinean troops patrolling the streets, MIG planes flying overhead, the arrest and subsequent charges of treason of PAL leaders and other political dissidents, the closure of the university, the government played a very heavy hand in crushing a protest that it had precipitated through its own policies.

The Doe Interlude: From Lumpen Military to Armed Gangs

These events revealed the government's vulnerability. Tolbert's vacillation between a personal instinct to try to manage reform and his overriding need to appease the old Whig aristocracy (who consistently demanded the use of sticks without carrots) left him appearing weak to all sides. Almost one year later to the day, April 12, 1980, Sergeant Samuel K. Doe and a few other noncommissioned officers from the Liberian military staged a successful *coup d'etat*, seizing power and summarily executing William Tolbert and 13 former government officials. Though these events were stunning in themselves, they also represented a profound break with the past: "[A]lthough the president could not fully control events or the settler group, he had become the Indispensable Man with respect to the survival of the caste relationship. When the president fell…the entire structure of dominance fell with him."[7] As the indigenous Liberians seized power, a century old "settler" oligarchy came to an end, and with it the "end of a distinct system of patrimonial rule."[8]

The Tubman and Tolbert administrations had maintained power by balancing an extensive patronage network, fueled by the government's direct and indirect control over the economy (through relationships with business partners). Controlling the economy had always been the key to maintaining power in Liberia, and continued to be one of the most decisive factors shaping events as the new regime took shape.

While Doe initially tried to establish a credible government with himself as the head of state, and even earned the loyalty of the civil service, the role of the state as the primary broker in allocating and managing commercial power was fading fast, and without any other source of influence and legitimacy, this meant that Doe was losing his mechanism to maintain power. "[C]ommercial operations shifted away from the heavy reliance on access to state power, and thus on presidential patronage, to establishing independent connections to global markets and regional non-state actors."[9] The big foreign investors upon whom Doe could rely for revenue began to leave: the National Iron Ore Company joint venture left in 1985, Bong Mining Company (German) in 1988 and the Liberian American Mining Company in 1989.[10] "[F]iscal and administrative malfeasance tended to favor smaller, better-connected Americo-Liberian and ethnic Lebanese operations, which could use personal connections and capacity to conceal commerce in more portable and marketable resources such as timber, rubber, gold and diamonds."[11] The connections of the locals were often with outlets in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea or Sierra Leone.

Further complicating the scene, Doe lacked an extensive personal network to compensate for his declining economic powerbase. Having come to power by overthrowing the government dominated by Americo-Liberians, he was isolated from their network of power and influence. Doe's ethnic group came from a remote area of the country, and he was without an ethnic power base in the capital city to provide organizational muscle and some semblance of ethnic legitimacy.

Since Doe had no other networks of support, especially in the capital Monrovia, he began to mobilize what Sawyer calls the "lumpen" military: that urban poor population that sought a living in the army but had no cultivated loyalty to either the mission of the national military or to any indigenous group.[12] With no firm ties in either the countryside or to the former Monrovia oligarchy, these young soldiers were easily mobilized. Doe was Krahn and did extend patronage to his homeland group in the southeast (Grand Gedah), yet his core support was located in these peers with few links to indigenous roots. In 1985 after a coup attempt by his top General, Thomas

Qwiwonkpa, Doe purged the remaining old lineage based elements of the Liberian military, the Gio and Mano, who in turn retreated to the border areas of Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire (only to subsequently become commandos in Charles Taylor's militia).[13]

Doe's hold on power was further weakened when the government organized a constitutional referendum in 1985. The US government had supported Liberia both financially and militarily, compelling the government to initiate a constitution drafting process between 1981 and 1984. After extensive consultation with the Liberian people, the document drafted by the Constitution Commission provided checks on executive authority and limited power sharing with other bodies, e.g., county governments. However, Doe's government radically revised the text under a second stage Advisory Assembly. By the time the constitutional referendum occurred in 1984 the public was confused, having taken seriously the three years of consultations and assurances that their views were important. Thus it came to be that the 1985 election was not only tainted procedurally, but it conveniently restored Doe to a very autocratic Presidency.[14]

By the late 1980s, therefore, Doe was weakened economically, politically, and in terms of legitimacy. He lost his foreign patron as well, as by this time the Reagan Administration had lost interest. Doe's empty treasury could no longer buy him support, and those who had their own now privatized connections to commercial resources did not need him any longer. Thus Doe became isolated and vulnerable to more and more challengers during the second half of the 1980s. Ever in search of resources he tripled public employment in five years, and began to pillage the state enterprises for his own purposes, e.g., running the Forestry Development Authority himself and the Liberian Petroleum Refining Corp for the subsidized oil imports that he, in turn, sold for personal profit.[15]

Outbreak of War, Regional Intervention, and the First Interim Government

Doe's government was eventually overthrown by rebel forces created by someone he himself had put into government. In the early 1980s, Doe had promoted people with ties to the United States into high administrative positions. Among these individuals was Charles Taylor, whom Doe had appointed Director of the General Services Agency, the procurement authority for the Liberian government. By 1984, however, while on an official business trip to the USA, Taylor was arrested on Liberian charges of embezzling nearly $1 million. Mysteriously, and for reasons never explained, Taylor escaped from prison while awaiting extradition, and disappeared.[16]

The scope of his ambition became clear on New Year's Eve in 1989, when Taylor invaded Liberia from the north with a mixed militia of mercenaries, regional and internal supporters called the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Chaos reigned in the next few months during which somewhere between 13,000 and 20,000 people died.[17] By mid-1990 most sources agree that Taylor's forces controlled 90 per cent of the country.

Throughout this period of the war, Taylor stayed in the north, consolidating his connections with various private commercial interests. Taylor had taken advantage of his years in exile to visit Libyan training camps and network with an array of dissidents from Liberia's neighbors. The economic foundations for cross-border partnerships had been established in the 1970s, when business partnerships moved away from government control and towards exchanges with partners in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone. Added to this, the military elements previously purged by Doe had originated in the border areas of Guinea and Sierra Leone, once again creating a marriage of military force and economic interest. In exile, Taylor brought together all these elements.

When he launched his assault on Doe's government in 1989, Taylor manipulated the relationships he had forged in Libya, and it is in this phase that the conflict became most regionalized. While in Libya, Taylor had developed a relationship with Foday Sankoh of Sierra

Leone, who, with Taylor's assistance, began a war against his own government to seize control over the rural diamond areas of Sierra Leone. Without Taylor's early financial backing and military assistance, the infamous Revolutionary United Front (RUF) may not have been able to seize control over any areas. With Taylor's assistance, Sankoh was able to ruthlessly mobilize diamonds to sell on the international market. Taylor's investment paid off, as Sankoh provided both himself and Taylor the means to acquire weapons to further fuel their ambitions to seize power in their respective countries.

The mix of regional nationalities involved in Taylor's NPFL made neighboring countries nervous, especially the Nigerians and Ghanaians. In mid-1990 Nigeria took the lead in securing formal support from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to sponsor a military "monitoring group" (ECOMOG) made up initially of solders from Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. The Nigerian foreign minister sought approval from the UN Security Council in August, though the move was largely a fig leaf for what was going to happen in any case.[18] The international force, along with the remnants of Doe's army, thwarted the NPFL advance on the port and the capital city, Monrovia.

Partisans of different groups were now diffused throughout the Mano River basin. Alhaji Kromah mobilized Liberians on both sides of the northwest Guinea border. A breakaway leader from Taylor's NPFL, Prince Johnson, was determined to benefit from what he regarded as the three-way contest for the post-Doe order: Taylor, ECOMOG and Johnson's own "Independent" NPFL. Accordingly Johnson murdered Doe in September, making sure to record the event on tape. While Taylor was obliged to stay in the north and regroup, Johnson was near Monrovia and welcomed the ECOMOG troops to Liberia.

Unlike many interim regimes, which are based on the principle that a transitional government must share power among all factions capable of spoiling the peace process, ECOMOG insisted that the resultant Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) could not include any of the warring parties in the country. As all the factions were discredited through their participation in the war, the logic was that the IGNU should remain untainted by association with these entities, and should instead constitute an impartial force to transition the country to a stable government. The international community, whether under the guise of ECOMOG or the UN, had no intention of running the Liberian government itself.

Therefore, ECOMOG invited professor Amos Sawyer, former chairman of the 1981-4 Constitution Commission, to be president under the IGNU.[19] Sawyer used the security of the ECOMOG zone to try to re-kindle debate and dialogue on a new plane of constitutional reconstruction. Two attempts resulted in regional, multilateral conferences (Cotonou, 1993; Akosombo, 1994), but Sawyer's efforts re-establish public trust through a credible democratic process and the involvement of Taylor (outside the zone of ECOMOG) were continuously rebuffed. As months extended to years, the discipline of ECOMOG failed to deliver anything but minimal security, which further hurt the legitimacy of the IGNU in the eyes of Liberians. The country was awash in armed gangs, so that the situation did not seem different from governance under Doe. Unable to forge a stable coalition, Sawyer eventually gave up his efforts to establish a new, more democratic order in 1994.

Taylor was relentless in his ambition, and managed to mobilize support by forging commercial alliances with local interests that had international market outlets. Over time he became the broker with the international connections needed by the small holders of local resources. Taylor did everything he could with his NPFL to create alliances of opportunity, capture resources and use those to mobilize others. Ultimately, however, what he really needed to consolidate his power was to somehow become the President of sovereign Liberia. In that regard he charmed regional leaders from Cote D'Ivoire to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), convincing them that he could bring order and peace to Liberia. Through his ULAA network Taylor impressed a number of

American leaders, including Jimmy Carter, that he was a democrat who could forge a regional peace if Carter would help him with the Nigerians.

Although the Nigerians had never favored capitulation to a Charles Taylor power grab, by 1995 ECOMOG was facing great frustration in the field as morale dropped, casualties rose (to 500 in the end), other national contingents grew unreliable, and locals accused them of looting and other behavior similar to those of the armed gangs (so much so that among locals, the acronym ECOMOG came to be understood as “every car or movable object gone”). Moreover, Nigerians at home were increasingly unhappy with the open ended engagement and the drain on resources.[20] The Sani Abacha government was getting concerned about the standoff and the loss to prestige if Nigeria were to withdraw with no new institutional outcome. Therefore, Nigeria mounted a peace conference at Abuja in 1995 to which Taylor was invited as a major participant. This led to a second one a year later at which ECOWAS heads of state blessed an accord with a transitional government to last until presidential and parliamentary elections in July of 1997.

Charles Taylor, remarkably, got the sovereignty he sought by winning the election decisively. In a thorough, plausible analysis of the election results in which Taylor’s National Patriotic Party (NPP, formed out of the original invasion force), garnered 75 per cent of the votes, David Harris concluded that “Taylor’s overwhelming victory most likely derived from a heady brew of electoral rules and irregularities, a huge campaign, a backbone of support, a divided and weak opposition, and his apparent dominance over the security question…”[21] This election result provided the basis for the ECOMOG forces to withdraw, and allowed the Nigerians some cover for their failed *Pax Nigeriana*.

The next six years revealed the worst aspects of the warlord political economy. Taylor had many rivals and bitter enemies by the late 1990s. They raised their own militias against him, using outside resources where possible (e.g., from neighboring Guinea in the case of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy - LURD). The mobilization of children as combatants, paying them in drugs or through booty they could seize brought the worlds attention once again to hapless Liberia (and Sierra Leone where limbs were being chopped off by Sankoh’s RUF). By 2003 the irregular forces of LURD and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), made up of anti-Taylor dissidents and Liberians returning from refuge in the neighboring states, were challenging Taylor and his increasingly fragmented supporters on the outskirts of Monrovia.

At this point in time, Liberia resembled many modern instances of civil war situations: there was no longer a Liberian government as that term is normally understood. No external force had intervened to protect the “government” from disintegration, and the civil service crumbled as unpaid government employees descended into survival mode like everyone else. What was new in this case was that, to some extent, the inversion of the state was intentional. In what has come to be termed a “warlord state,” government came to exist solely to extract productive resources and to distribute them amongst the ruling group’s members, rather than to provide security and services to the population at large. The government existed to control economic resources, paying little attention to anything else. In the warlord state, functional ministries no longer existed. Somebody in Taylor’s entourage might have been the minister of finance or agriculture, but the minister had no competent staff or necessarily any experience in administration of the portfolio. The “cabinet” had no bureaucracy, nor in the end were the combatants themselves being paid. Taylor admitted that his people “paid themselves” with what they could take.

As dead bodies were piled up in front of the US Embassy in Monrovia as a symbol of total chaos and a plea for the Americans to intervene in August of 2003, a peace accord was forged among the warring factions in Accra, Ghana. To avoid facing a new international military force and appearing in an international criminal court, Taylor accepted exile in Nigeria. A new ECOMOG contingent was mobilized under a United Nations Peacekeeping mandate, and a Special UN Representative began to restore order. Thus began the third interim regime.

Before moving to an assessment of this latest interim government, we summarize the conditions of state failure in post-Cold War Sub-Saharan Africa which allowed warlord alternative to emerge.

- First, the internal features of Cold War-era patron-client politics translate into vulnerabilities for rulers amid increasing external pressures from donors and creditors for reforms, both political and economic (viz., structural adjustment, market liberalization, privatization, civil society, etc.).
- Second, weak, patrimonial states are unable to implement policies that would re-structure the economy to launch it on a liberal-rational path. Without the Great Power rivalry to justify continued opportunistic support, domestic economies deteriorate amidst the demands of creditors and business-as-usual elite corruption.
- Third, weak-state leaders develop new strategies for converting patronage politics into "warlord politics," e.g., using private militias, whether domestic or external, to seize and exploit resources in the state. These "commercial partnerships" essentially replace the Cold War bureaucratic state.
- Other strong-man competitors translate entrepreneurship into informal political authority.
- Alliances are temporary and know no borders; in fact, the hallmark of warlord politics are the cross-border alliances that provide rebel movements safe havens in neighboring territories.
- Finally, weak states reveal a new organization of global capital that exploits commercial opportunities previously out of reach. As these transactions cumulate the exercise of political authority is "almost indistinguishable from private commercial operations."[22]

The Third Interim Government

On August 18, 2003, the Government of Liberia (GOL), the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), The Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and the Political Parties signed a peace agreement in Accra, Ghana. The main provisions of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (ACPA) included:[23]

- ceasefire and monitoring;
- an international Stabilization Force;
- disengagement;
- demobilization, disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration;
- security sector reforms: disbandment of irregulars, restructuring of the armed forces, structuring of the national police and other special security services;
- the release of prisoners and abductees;
- the establishment of an independent national commission on human rights;
- the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation commission;
- humanitarian relief;
- the creation of a governance reform commission;
- the creation of a contract and monopolies commission;
- electoral reform and new elections in October, 2005;
- the founding of a National Transitional Government of Liberia consisting of an executive, a legislative assembly and a judiciary. The primary responsibility of this government was to ensure the implementation of provisions of the peace agreement;
- international assistance: a UN Special Representative, a consolidated UN Mission, and specific calls to ECOWAS, UN, AU, EU and the ICGL to mobilize resources for post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction; and
- assistance to refugees, displaced persons and other vulnerable groups, esp. women, children.

All of these provisions preempt the provisions of the Constitution, Statutes and other laws of Liberia until January 2006 when they will be restored along with the installation of a newly elected government. The executing partnership of the NTGL is a broad coalition of external players: the United Nations, ECOWAS, the African Union, the European Union, the United States, the IMF and the World Bank (hereafter referred to as The Partners). This interim government, unlike the first two, has a much heavier international footprint.

Peace First

Restoring public order was the first priority in the summer/fall of 2003. A country-wide state of peace has gradually been achieved over the last twenty-four months. Initially ECOWAS established an "interposition" force, subsequently integrated into an International Stabilization Force under UN auspices (UNOMIL). The UN force is now 15,000 soldiers, the largest such UN peacekeeping force on the ground in the world. This force is to remain until both the UN Security Council and the elected government of Liberia, after January 1, 2006, determine otherwise.

The disarmament and demobilization (DD) of the armed gangs has also made progress after a very rocky start in which the early weapons recovery effort backfired. This DD work continues as a delicate, piecemeal operation of identifying "leaders" of the youthful groups in the field, convincing them the war is over, offering opportunities for schooling and a better life. What they want, inevitably, is money. Money continues to be used in direct exchange for weapons. The danger is that most of the former combatants are essentially homeless, many are ill and the capacity of the RR program to place them in even a subsistence setting is limited.[24]

Reforms under the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL)

One of the main problems with the first transitional government had been that none of the armed elements in Liberia had any stake in the government. This time, the signatories to the transitional peace accord in August of 2003 were largely self-identified political stakeholders with militias, and the transitional government created in the accord guaranteed representation for these groups. While the various rivals agreed to the processes outlined in the document, implementation of the agreement invariably raised the unresolved distributive claims of those very signatories. This was assured by the formula by which numbers of seats in the transitional legislature are allocated to specific groups, e.g., LURD, MODEL, GOL, other political parties, counties, etc. Similarly, ministerial portfolios were allocated based on negotiations among the stakeholder groups. So, although the Transitional Chairman, Gyude Bryant, has no partisan past, the other players in the NTGL mirror the factional interests in place at the end of the war.

Peace and security have been restored, but the political institutional "reforms" have not progressed in the past two years, beyond planning for the just completed October election. Former President/Professor Amos Sawyer expressed great reluctance about going ahead with the recent election because the contending factions have not really agreed to compromise on much of anything. New parties reflecting civil society organizations, new platforms, nationwide debates and discussions need to occur before an election is held that could actually be expected to launch the country on a new trajectory. Sawyer sees the "reform" path of neighboring Sierra Leone as a model *not* to be emulated. In fact he proposes a regional reform process since the institutional problems have been shown to be regional at every turn of events.[25]

Similarly, there has been little progress in the reform of the economy. This is especially important for an assessment of the progress and pitfalls of the interim regime, since the warlordization of politics that tore apart the Liberian state in the first place was based on a desire to manipulate the country's rich economic resources. The ACPA agreement put a premium on economic and fiscal management reforms that would address the endemic corruption of the warlord state. A Contract and Monopolies Commission (CMC) was established to "oversee activities of a contractual nature undertaken by the NTGL," Article XVII.[26] External audits of the Central Bank of Liberia, the five principal state enterprises and economic investigations where necessary were to be undertaken as the Partners thought necessary if they were to continue to support the reform effort.

At a meeting held in Copenhagen in May of 2005, the NTGL and its Partners "concluded that there should be a more robust approach to economic governance in Liberia, with immediate and firm remedial efforts." Audits by Liberia's AG financed by the European Commission "have shown serious mismanagement of pubic finances in several key revenue earning agencies," noting "the unprecedented step taken by the ECOWAS for deployment of investigators and economic crime experts to study the situation and report back."[27] In March 2005 a UN panel discovered that Liberian officials had signed a secret contract giving a European company a virtual monopoly on mining diamonds. The arrangement "had involved members of the transitional government…"[28]

In the meantime the Partners agreed to a new Economic Governance Action Plan that outlines in some detail a rigorous implementation of sound economic and fiscal management, including

- securing the revenue base from the SOEs and the Central Bank;
- improving budgeting and expenditure management;
- improving procurement practices;
- establishing new judicial measures to control corruption;
- requesting international assistance to be targeted at several key institutions, e.g., the Central Bank, the General Accounting Office, the Governance Reform Commission among others; and
- parallel building of local capacity in these same institutions.

The Partners agreed that the plan would be executed in the framework of the Results Focused Transition Framework that coordinates donor resources with national resources and will be replaced by an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy when the new government takes over in January 2006.

This plan is facing several obstacles, however. First, it is being challenged by many Liberians at home and abroad as impinging on the country's sovereignty. They do not feel ownership of the plan, as it was designed and pushed on the NGTL by its international overseers. They also believe that the plan puts too much weight on international agencies, ignoring the fact that there are many talented Liberian professionals of integrity who can be entrusted with these important economic institutions after the election. Second, the fact that little has really changed at the level of connections between the political class and local commercial interests, and that corruption still plagues the most central economic management institutions suggests the economic transition is incomplete. The Partners are telling the NTGL that they will not continue to support a new government if there is not more palpable progress in reforming the country's economic management.

Problems with economic reforms and the ongoing, if murky involvement of Taylor in exercising influence among his loyalists in and around the NTGL from his exile in Nigeria, mean that the October election and transition to a new government in January could be a recipe for a re-run of the recent past.

Transitioning from Interim to Permanent Government

A national election was held on October 11, 2005 for the offices of President and the ninety-four seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Most reports indicate that the administration of the election was sound and consistent across the country, which was a considerable feat when one factors in the terrible infrastructure conditions in the country (e.g., no reliable electric power even in the capital city). After ballot counting, the top two candidates among the twenty-two presidential hopefuls were Mr. George Weah, a former international football player, and Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former finance minister and Africa region head of the UN Development Program.

A runoff election took place on November 8, 2005, in which Johnson-Sirleaf got 59% of the vote. Weah's party filed a complaint with the National Electoral Commission alleging fraud. After several weeks of investigation the NEC announced on December 16th that the "evidence adduced was not sufficient to constitute massive fraud."[29] Confirming this outcome, George Weah met with President-elect Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf on December 17th to discuss a peaceful transition. The new government is expected to assume power in January 2006.

Reflections on the State, Governance, Legitimacy

What can we learn from twenty-five years of conflict in Liberia punctuated by four different transitional and/or interim governments? We must begin with whether the evident endemic instability since the early1980s puts into question the very "state-ness" of Liberia. Whatever one thinks of the pre-1980 party boss, patron-client system, the Republic of Liberia was regarded as a sovereign state. At the same time the claim to sovereignty was based on an historical construction, the legitimacy of which was beginning to be extended to the whole population only in the 1960s as Tubman extended the franchise and a homogeneous administrative system to the "countryside."

Other analysts like Amos Sawyer would argue that Liberia's problem is not one of state sovereignty, but one of governance. He has argued for years that the governance problem is essentially one of over-centralization of the presidency, which occurred under Tubman's long tenure. The fact that the President has so much power in Liberia makes it the single prize for those with political ambition. As a political scientist, activist and former interim president, Sawyer believes that an auspiciously designed decentralized or "polycentric" constitution can garner the legitimacy a national government would require.[30]

At the same time the instability of the past twenty years could be said to have undermined the integrity of the state of Liberia, especially as one ponders the regional character of the conflict. Some analysts of the first ECOMOG venture (1990-96) describe the interim government as maintaining "the fiction that Liberia was still a state with Monrovia as the main actor."[31] Visitors to Monrovia during that period easily missed the fact that they were in what today we would call the "green zone," borrowing the concept developed in Iraq to refer to the narrow scope of territory controlled by a "national" government. In Liberia, the real center of gravity had passed into the hands of sub-state actors, with contenders setting up their own capitals around the country.[32]

This debate about whether Liberia's problems are principally those of state legitimacy or governance resolves in the implications of the "failed state." Weak governance undermines the principle of sovereignty. "Weak …refers to state strength …meaning a lack of institutional capacity to implement and enforce policies, often driven by an underlying lack of legitimacy of the political system as a whole."[33]

What then have been the effects of the two respective ECOMOG/UN interventions in Liberia and their parallel interim governments with regard to re-establishing stability, governance and even legitimacy? Certainly the *Pax Nigeriana* underlying the first ECOMOG began as a genuine effort to assert regional leadership, but it was based on an underestimation of the scale and complexity of the task. ECOMOG was not really able to contain conflicts beyond a limited zone, was stretched by having to enter the Sierra Leonean theater as well, and faced test after test of rotating and dwindling, contingents from its regional ECOWAS partner countries. Sawyer's interim government was unable to extend the dialogue and bring a peace settlement home despite heroic efforts mainly because Taylor was ultimately strong enough to resist any compromise. The election of 1997, handing Taylor “legitimate” power, was a shame to all concerned in that he continued to behave as a warlord rather than a statesman, e.g., selling diamonds to *al Qaeda* in 2001.[34]

The carnage of the 1997-2003 period brought back a different, more robust ECOMOG and a much more robust United Nations commitment. As recounted above, the warring parties made up the interim government, with the exception of the role of Executive Chairman of the Transition Government. Although peace was restored and up to 100,000 persons have been disarmed, the continued reports of corrupt practices regarding natural resources exports leaves the future very uncertain.

The apparent determination of the external “Partners” described above to restore integrity to the economic management of Liberia is as much a test of the legitimacy of the new government and the effectiveness of the state as the election itself. Operating from outside Liberia’s borders, and with few concrete ties to the domestic economy, these international actors have been unable, so far, to force effective economic reforms on the country. Thus, the economic legitimacy that the interim government sorely needs is lacking.

Political legitimacy seems to be scarce as well. The future might have been brighter if the interim government arrangements had provided for a full constitutional review and design to be ratified by the public before the UNOMIL mandate expired. Because of the configuration of the interim government that did not happen, and therefore the October election proceeded without the participation of new civil society groups and political parties. Interim governance in Liberia remained a top-down process, governed by the warring parties and the international community. The degree of domestic acceptance is still unknown, once the new, “permanent” government assumes power in January 2006, domestic evaluations may be easier to discern. Institutionally speaking, Liberia is mostly where it was in 1996, with the difference that over 200,000 people have died and everyone is exhausted. That is the only advantage this new government has in facing the future.

About the Author

E. Philip Morgan specializes in public organizations and institutional development. While a professor of politics, public administration and development throughout his career, he has also worked, *inter alia*, with the World Bank, USAID and UNDP on diagnostic studies, technical assistance and training in: organization and management improvement; human resource development; program evaluation; and trade capacity-building.

Morgan has published widely in the areas of program and project management, comparative civil service systems and reforms, and the linkages between development policy making and the instruments of policy action. He also serves on the editorial advisory boards of several journals and publishing firms specializing in international development policy and management. He has lived and worked extensively in both the French- and English-speaking countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, with a long-term commitment to the countries of Southern Africa.

He was a Fulbright Professor at the University of Botswana beginning a ten-year affiliation with the Institute of Development Management [1970s-80s]. In the 1990s he coordinated a research program for World Bank on indigenous institutions and management practices in Africa. More recently he assisted with program reviews on HIV/AIDS in Africa. He has also traveled and lectured in both East and Southeast Asia, and worked on a joint WB/UNDP venture in Laos. Morgan earned his doctorate at Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

After many years as a professor and administrator at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs of Indiana University, Bloomington, he became Dean of the Graduate School of International Policy Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California in 1997. In 2003 he returned to teaching, research and consulting.

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